A Shadow of Father and Sister

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Over a decade after its release, with its enemy attack patterns, item locations and optimal progression paths committed to memory – or, at least, a wiki – it's easy to forget just how much *Dark Souls* keeps hidden from the player. The critical pathway that the player must take through Lordran on their quest to link the fire is always made apparent, but the world extends far beyond the boundaries of where we're told to go, revealed when we push through its limits. An endgame boss fought earlier than intended, a hollow tree broken open, and an elevator jumped from mid-descent all reveal previously unseen aspects of Lordran to us, demonstrating that the boundaries imposed on us by our quest are, well, imposed: As the game reaches its climax, it becomes increasingly clear that the prophecy of the Chosen Undead is designed to serve the interests of an existing power structure, with anything politically inconvenient about Lordran's people and history left unacknowledged, even when it's right in front of us.

Gwyndolin, despite their status as the last non-barbequed God in Lordran, is one of these unacknowledged aspects, and is entirely possible to complete the game without even learning of their existence. Not only is Gwyndolin located outside the boundaries of our quest, but the method by which they are encountered is esoteric in the extreme: The player must retrieve a ring from a corpse, which is accessed by breaking through a specific wall, then travel to the other side of the world, lower an elevator into a position that *prevents* access to a crucial pathway, put the ring on and stand in front of a specific statue. Stated like this, we'd reasonably expect that Gwyndolin would be an obscurity known only to the game's most devoted fans, or at best a checklist item for completionists. It is notable, then, that *Dark Souls III* felt confident enough to bring Gwyndolin back as part of a grotesque set piece, secure in the knowledge that players would immediately recognise what was happening on screen without further explanation. Something about Gwyndolin clearly resonates.

This resonance, however, is far different to that of the other tragic, outcast characters in *Dark Souls*. Where these characters offend the status quo through their actions – betrayals, deaths, and sundry other falls from grace – Gwyndolin offends the status quo by simply *existing*. Every aspect of Gwyndolin's being, from their sex to their body language to the spaces they inhabit, is depicted as existing outside of established binaries, embodying a challenge to the ways binaries are naturalised and enforced – both inside *and* outside of Lordran.

Relations Shift and Obscure

The introductory sequence of *Dark Souls* presents the audience with a story that, on the surface, reads not unlike a heroic creation myth: The world as we know it is the "Age of Fire", an epoch brought about when a caste of Godlike beings, wielding powers granted by the discovery of fire, conquered the dragons who ruled the primordial "Age of Ancients". The way the story is told, however, is far more detached than this summary suggests, with its primary concern being the way in which binaries were first created, and then forced upon the world. It is also deeply critical of these binaries, depicting them as something that, while they offer immense power to those who enforce them, are also inherently unstable, and ultimately unsustainable.

The Age of Ancients, the world before fire, is described as lacking hard boundaries. It is "unformed, shrouded by fog", a grey place without day, night or horizon, and devoid of life, save for dragons made from stone. These dragons, described as "everlasting", do not appear to live, die, eat, or reproduce, not because of some alien quirk of their biology – as they are about to discover – but because they inhabit a world where these concepts do not yet exist. A world like this cannot accommodate fire because, as the narrator explains, fire necessitates the existence of binary oppositions: Proximity to fire means things can now be hot or cold, the light produced by the flame means things can be lit or in shadow, and the process of burning is one with a beginning and an end. When fire first appears – it is unclear how, or from where – it immediately begins to transform the world around it, manifesting as a conflict in which the binary oppositions produced by the flame function as weapons of war. Light, flame and decay are unleashed upon the dragons, peeling the inert, everlasting stone from their bodies and leading to their defeat. This conflict ends the Age of Ancients, fundamentally altering the way the world functions, and beginning the Age of Fire. This new age, ruled by Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight, is founded upon a series of clearly-defined binary oppositions that came about with the flame: heat and cold, life and death, light and dark. "But soon", the narrator informs us, "the flames will fade".

The binary concepts which dominate Age of Fire, it turns out, aren't producing binary results, and for good reason: Fire isn't static, it's an ongoing process driven by constant change, and will inevitably fade away into something else. The very notion of the flame fading away calls the legitimacy of the Age of Fire's binary world into question, because a *fading* flame exists on a continuum, neither fully one thing or the other. The Lordran we journey though embodies the changes brought about by the shift from "disparity" to "fading", overrun by signs not of death *per se*, but of the intermediate processes of decay and stagnation. Not only is the land itself filled with abandoned dwellings, diseased animals, and whole cities sinking into swamps, but the flow of time has ceased being strictly linear, allowing for the player to experience a multiplicity of parallel pasts, presents and futures, none more "correct" than the others. As Knight Solaire explains to us, "The flow of time itself is convoluted […] The very fabric wavers, and relations shift and obscure", a far cry from the triumphant, absolutist disparity that began the Age of Fire.

The player character, regardless of chosen origin, is also presented as an outcome of this process: They are an Undead, a category of person that arose as the flames began to fade. To be an Undead in *Dark Souls* is to exist outside of the life / death binary, able to die as easily as anybody else, but unable to *remain* dead, in denial of either extreme. The narrator informs us that it is official state policy for Undead to be "corralled", "led to the North" and "locked away", but what remains *unsaid* is even more significant: We are never given a reason for their exile and incarceration other than, simply, their being Undead. While the trauma of repeated death and resurrection can cause an Undead's mind to eventually break down, the real danger posed by the Undead is that they deviate from the principles that govern the Age of Fire, showing that not all life (or death) is bound by simplistic binaries. We encounter an incredibly diverse range of exiled Undead on our journey, including warriors, workers, vagrants, con artists, merchants, priests, scholars and royalty, because Undeath is something that arises naturally in the human population, and thus cannot be prevented or contained. Undead are persecuted not because *what they did*, but because of *what they are*; an existential threat to the established order that arises as a result of the order itself.

Undead being, you know, *undead*, means they're unlikely to disappear once they arrive. The response is an ultimately futile quarantine measure in which the Undead are exiled and kept out of sight, whilst simultaneously expected to shoulder the burden of maintaining the Age of Fire by

kindling its flames with their bodies. If we stray from the path expected of us, though, we find that we're not the only people in Lordran who got kicked out for breaking the binary mould.

Man? Woman? Time For Labyrinth

Like the Undead, what we're explicitly told about Gwyndolin is notable for what it leaves unsaid. Prior to encountering Gwyndolin directly, the only reference the player has is the Darkmoon Seance Ring, which mentions the "last born of Gwyn" who is "the only remaining deity in Anor Londo", described using male pronouns. Should we then go through the necessary steps to meet Gwyndolin, we proceed to… not meet Gwyndolin, because they're talking to us from the other side of a barrier we can't see through. Through forming an alliance, we learn that Gwyndolin is "all too aware of his repulsive, frail appearance", and should we disobey their instructions and step through the fog, we discover the nature of this repulsiveness: Where the Undead are outcast monsters blurring the binary of life and death, Gwyndolin is an outcast monster blurring the binary of male and female.

The simplest way to explain Gwyndolin's gender is that it seems clear until it doesn't. All in-game text references to Gwyndolin use male pronouns, although Gwyndolin never outright states their gender while speaking, instead using the archaic pronoun "mineself" (the Japanese script uses "nanji", a similarly archaic genderless pronoun). Gwyndolin wears long, flowing, feminine attire, and we are told that "he was raised as a daughter" due to a personal affinity for the Moon, seen as the feminine counterpart to the masculine Sun. This suggests Gwyndolin is a man putting on a feminine performance for ceremonial purposes, possibly against their will… and yet, despite spending their time alone and unseen, despite having essentially unaccountable power as the last remaining deity in Anor Londo, Gwyndolin is always "said to behave as a sullen, brooding Goddess", with no indication that this is a persona.

Gwyndolin's physical body is likewise defined by sexual ambiguity. Their voice is provided by a male actor, Harry Lister Smith, but the performance is melodic and androgynous. Gwyndolin's face is soft-featured, and their body, partially concealed by a shawl, appears to have a slim, almost childlike build. Taken in tandem with the prior use of male pronouns, we might assume that Gwyndolin is a *bishonen*, an androgynously beautiful young man. A closer inspection, though, reveals that Gwyndolin's physical body has obvious, distinct female sexual characteristics, with sizeable breasts, rounded hips, and a tapering waist - if this really is all an act, they're taking it *very* seriously. Even the room in which we encounter Gwyndolin suggests ambiguity, beginning as a simple corridor before warping and changing into a seemingly infinite pathway with no clear end point.

The purpose of this essay isn't to litigate whether or not Gwyndolin is transgender, non-binary, genderfluid, a cisgender man performing a ceremonial female role, has a difference of sexual development, or any other possible interpretation, but to examine the questions and implications posed by *the ambiguity itself*. Not only can *Dark Souls* fandom not reach a consensus on Gwyndolin's gender, the game itself can't either, with each piece of information seemingly at odds with another. We might think we have a straightforward answer, only for it to collapse upon closer inspection, revealing a mass of contradictions that we'd unconsciously ignored because we "just knew" things were a certain way. This shouldn't be surprising, because it's how gender works in real life, too.

Physical Snake, Cultural Genital

Every day, we encounter hundreds, if not thousands, of other human beings who we immediately "know" are men or women. We're so used to "knowing", in fact, that we don't often ask ourselves *how* we know. If we take the most basic, reductive approach to gender and say that what makes us a man or a woman is our genitalia, then we have a problem: People do not, as a rule, walk around in public with their genitalia on display. Displaying genitalia publicly is such a taboo, in fact, that it's the part of someone's body you're least likely to see – but we seem to "know", regardless.

In 1978, the sociologists Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna set out to untangle this paradox. Throughout their research interviews, they were told, time and again, that what made someone a man or a woman was their genitalia, even though nobody present actually performed genital inspections before making reaching the decision. Their work, published in *Gender: An Ethnomethodolical Approach*, proposed a solution they termed "Cultural Genitals". Rather than inspect a person's physical genitalia in order to determine their gender, we first determine their gender through a series of social cues – build, dress, hair, voice, and any other data we think might be relevant to our assessment – and then attribute the genitalia we believe they *ought* to have. These "Cultural Genitals", despite not existing in a physical sense, are more "real" than physical ones, as they are what govern all our social interactions, something increasing visibility of transgender people in the intervening decades has made even clearer.

Gwyndolin makes for an especially interesting case here, because Gwyndolin does not actually possess any physical genitalia in the first place. This is true both in the technical sense that they only exist as a polygonal model in a video game, and in the far more intriguing sense that the character's design draws attention to the ambiguity below their waist. What we see of Gwyndolin's lower body from beneath their gown is mass of writhing snakes upon which the humanoid torso seemingly levitates. The presence of the gown makes it unclear exactly how the snakes connect to the rest of Gwyndolin's body, raising the very distinct possibility that Gwyndolin simply has no genitals at all. The way the snakes are displayed is also worthy of note. While a *single* snake would suggest a phallus, Gwyndolin possesses a *series* of snakes, arranged as if crawling from their lower body, more suggestive of birth or menstruation. Male? Female? Both? Neither?

Sexually ambiguous *and* lacking obvious physical genitals, Gwyndolin forces us to confront our reliance on cultural genitals as a means of making gender intelligible. Their biography, physical sexual characteristics, voice, dress, mannerisms and behaviour all tell us a slightly different story, making the act of gendering Gwyndolin a far more conscious and considerate one than we're used to. The answer we ultimately reach, if we reach one at all, matters less than the process we used to get there.

The Shackles Placed Upon Your Brethren

When we hear people describe gender as "performative" and "created by our behaviour" without further explanation, it can lead us – not unreasonably – to assume this means that gender is simply a form of personal expression that we are free to play around with. This isn't what "performative" means, which is just as well, because it very obviously isn't true: Gendered expression is *aggressively* policed. As Judith Butler articulates in 1990's *Gender Trouble*, gender is a "regulatory fiction", something that limits our self-expression by forcing us to behave as though we belong to one of two neatly-defined categories of person, even when it goes against our nature. We

are always governed by a series of expectations around how a "real" man and a "real" woman should look, feel and behave, often with a spurious biological justification attached.

The problem created by naturalising gender like this is, simply, that no human being actually experiences or expresses gender in such a clear-cut manner. If it's so basic and natural, why does it need to be so harshly regulated? If I am inescapably a man or woman because of my biology, why do I *also* need to dress and act a certain way to be taken seriously as one? Why are so many people anxious and unhappy with gendered expectations around career, family, and body image? We cannot be at peace with our deep-seated, 100% socially acceptable masculine or feminine essence, Butler argues, because it was never inside us to begin with. It's only on the surface. It's *performative*.

It is important to stress that "performative" is not simply a pretentious way of saying "performance". A "performance" is a role that we act out, but a "performative" is a role that we construct *by* acting out. It's this creative aspect that's the key difference. Gender is a "performative" not because we're choosing to act in a masculine or feminine way, but because the very concepts of "masculinity" and "femininity" as we understand them *only* exist as a result of us acting them out. Our behaviour functions as a kind of ritual that summons gender into being and maintains its presence. Because gender is an inescapable part of our lives, we find ourselves repeating these ritual actions every single day to the point that they become mundane. To quote *Gender Trouble*, "the actors themselves come to believe, and to perform in the mode of belief"; we may not consciously notice the artificiality, even though so many of us keenly feel it.

The critique here is not that we're delusional, brainwashed sheep for developing or expressing a gender identity, it's that our means of doing so are limited by a system that demands we do gender in a way that makes the patriarchal, heteronormative status quo seem legitimate. In Butler's words, "the power regimes […] seek to augment themselves through a constant repetition of their logic, their metaphysic, and their naturalised ontology" – always *theirs*, not ours. Our behaviour creates our gender, but we have to make sure we create the *right kind* of gender, or else.

This performative nature makes gender something which, despite having an inescapable stranglehold on our lives, also starts to fall apart when we apply even the slightest pressure. Humans can, and do, wear clothing, adopt body language, apply cosmetics, have sexual and romantic relationships, sculpt our bodies and do a thousand other things in defiance of expectation. We don't even need to do it deliberately – we can simply "get it wrong" without meaning to. None of these things are biologically determined, immutable, or essential, but they *are* a threat to the patriarchal status quo, and consequently punished. One of Butler's illustrative examples of this is that of a young man who was savagely beaten for simply swaying his hips while walking around town, something which should by all rights be innocuous, but posed such a threat that it was met with physical violence.

Any system like this deserves to be critiqued and dismantled, and even if *Dark Souls* isn't citing Butler, there's a still an obvious loathing of anyone who insists that there's only one correct self to present.

Illusory Girl Ahead

Although *Dark Souls III* later complicates matters, the Gwyn of the original *Dark Souls* has three children: Gwyndolin, Gwynevere, and one known only as "The Nameless King". The Nameless King, Gwyn's son and first born, takes after his father in embodying an idealised, powerful, all-

conquering masculinity. He is physically enormous, wields a huge phallic spear, commands his father's warriors, and is worshiped across Lordran as the God of War. Gwynevere, Gwyn's daughter and second born, embodies the Nameless King's feminine opposite. She is a voluptuous young woman reclining passively on a bed, a mother of "many heavenly children" who provides healing and protection to her brother's warriors. Together, the two halves form a whole, a perfect balance of archetypal male and archetypal female that… falls apart almost immediately.

Further investigation reveals that neither Nameless King nor Gwynevere actually fulfilled the roles expected of them. The Nameless King, it turns out, wasn't the perfect son after all, and disobeyed his father's will, switching sides during battle and befriending the enemy. For this, his name is struck from history, his altars and representations destroyed, and his divine privileges rescinded. Gwynevere has likewise fled Lordran after being forcibly betrothed in a marriage of political convenience, refusing to accept unconditional self-sacrifice as her wifely duty, and eloping with another deity. Unlike the Nameless King, however, Gwynevere continues to be a revered part of the royal family, with likenesses of her prominently displayed throughout Anor Londo. When we arrive, we find her waiting in her bedchamber, welcoming us in and praising our bravery. Or, at least, something that looks like her is.

What we actually find in Gwynevere's bedchamber is an illusion, a facsimile created and maintained by Gwyndolin. Much of Anor Londo itself, too, is Gwyndolin's creation. The radiant sun and legions of gold-clad royal knights only exist through Gwyndolin's actions, with the city underneath near-empty and trapped in perpetual twilight. The versions of Anor Londo and Gwynevere presented to us are, in a roundabout way, performative: They are not reflections or projections of the real city and the real princess, they are unnatural, artificial constructs designed to legitimise the Age of Fire by obscuring its inherent instability. The illusory sun and illusory princess are only so perfect *because* they are illusory, made "real" through the repeated, conscious efforts of Gwyndolin, who is deemed monstrous, and must remain out of sight.

The way that Gwyndolin's illusions articulate in the game is of particular interest when we relate it back to the prior discussion of performativity. Breaking the illusion is *remarkably* easy, to the point where many players do so purely by accident: *Any* form of damage inflicted on the illusory Gwynevere will cause the city's surface level to melt away instantly, and players used to games that prevent the death of plot-crucial characters may simply assume that Gwynevere "must be" invulnerable to damage before trying to land a firebomb in her cleavage. The performative Anor Londo, though, is so surface-level and fragile, with no real foundations to support it, that the slightest nudge causes it to collapse.

Crucially, though, the end of the illusion is not the end of Anor Londo itself. We can still complete our quest, even maintain the Age of Fire as intended, in an empty city overseen by Gwyndolin. There is, strictly speaking, no reason for any of the charade to exist, and no reason Gwyndolin cannot rule the city openly as the last remaining deity. The illusion must be maintained, though, because their nature runs counter to the Age of Fire's narrative of eternal binary oppositions. The mere existence of someone like Gwyndolin is so threatening that they can never be seen or acknowledged, only permitted to interact with the world by first creating fragile illusions of what they are told *should* be there. Their oath, spoken if we form an alliance, describes them perfectly as "a shadow of father Gwyn and sister Gwynevere".

They're also the only survivor.

You Died, I Will Survive

The Undead and Gwyndolin both embody the inevitable breakdown of a binary system, and are both are subject to exile, persecution, and the demand that they work to carry on a status quo that never accepted them in the first place. The key word, though, is *inevitable*: the fire *will* fade, and a new world *will* follow. The Age of Fire is increasingly nearing its end by the time of *Dark Souls III*, with much of the world now lost, and the flames only sustained through constant, ritualistic immolation of unwilling Undead, some burned so often that they are reduced to piles of ash. All the old Gods are now vanished or dead, save one: In the frozen ruins of Anor Londo, Gwyndolin still remains.

They're dead, but only recently so. Prior to their assassination, Gwyndolin was able to maintain Anor Londo in spite of the destruction and chaos around them, without illusory citizens, illusory sun, or illusory gender. Gwyndolin was at last able to rule the twilight city hidden away in *Dark Souls*, openly and publicly acknowledged as its God, no longer hiding their nature from the world. It's their very success in doing so that that makes them the target of the power-hungry Sulyvahn, who understands that he can use Gwyndolin's image as a source of authority, in the same way that Gwyndolin once used Gwynevere's.

A world that is not shackled by the binary Age of Fire is a world that Gywndolin and the Undead are suited to, able to navigate it, thrive, and reclaim agency, while the old guard stumble, cower, and lash out. Given their adherence to tradition, it's perhaps unlikely that Gwyndolin would have *appreciated* the end of the Age of Fire, but it's still a place they clearly belong, finally out of the shadow of father and sister.